

## **THE EPISTEMIC RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE UNIVERSITY**

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### **1. MAIN RESEARCH QUESTION AND URGENCY**

Universities have shown to possess significant staying power. This has to do with the widely recognized, albeit not uncontested, importance of their mission. This project aims to contribute to the staying power of universities by revisiting and updating their uniquely important mission and responsibilities.

From their very inception in medieval times, the mission and *raison d'être* of universities has been tightly bound up with values. Although it is fair to say that actual universities have sought and continue to seek to promote a diversity of values, epistemic values—values having to do with knowledge, truth, understanding, wisdom, and intellectual excellence and virtuousness—are distinctive of and crucial to the idea of a university as a center of teaching, research, and scholarship.

Values ground responsibilities. The value of justice, for example, grounds our responsibilities to treat each other justly. The value of freedom grounds our responsibilities to respect each other's choices. Similarly for epistemic values. The value of understanding grounds the responsibilities of professors to treat their students in such a way that true learning is accomplished. The value of truth grounds responsibilities of researchers and scholars to pursue knowledge with integrity, skill, and open minds. The epistemic values that are central to the idea of a university thus ground the epistemic responsibilities of the university. This project seeks to investigate, defend, and reinvigorate the epistemic responsibilities of the university, and to engage and influence policy makers and opinion leaders in their views on the primary epistemic responsibilities of the university. Its central question is:

**'What are the epistemic values that the modern university ought to uphold, what responsibilities flow from these, and how can it meet these responsibilities in the face of contemporary challenges?'**

The project is urgent. Over the past decade, a considerable number of commentators from both inside and outside the halls of academia have expressed grave concerns about the fate of the university in our times. Although their complaints and diagnoses are diverse, one recurring theme is that various forces, which have been acting upon the university for some time now, are threatening to drown out epistemic values from the university.

This happens in a number of ways. First, the way that certain kinds of social, political, and economic values are imposed upon universities makes it ever more difficult for universities to uphold their core commitments to their epistemic responsibilities and values. Consider, for instance, how allegedly economically rational measures of efficiency and effectiveness can make it difficult for educators to dedicate the time and attention to their students that would be required to foster genuine intellectual growth and formation. Or how political pressure on universities and researchers to engage in research projects that are deemed to be 'socially relevant' can obstruct more fundamental scientific progress.

Second, certain kinds of epistemic values tend to be prioritized at the cost of other epistemic values, especially in so-called research universities. Particularly, a strong focus on research and 'knowledge production' can endanger those broader epistemic values that belong more naturally with teaching and the formation of

intellectual character, such as intellectual humility, a desire for learning, open-mindedness, understanding, and wisdom. This might go some way towards explaining the staggering findings that many students hardly show any improvement in learning on standardized tests after four years of college education.

Third, the pressure on universities to deliver socially and technically useful knowledge has brought the liberal arts in dire straits. Since the kinds of learning that the humanities produce is less tangible and less directly and visibly relevant to topical social and technological concerns, they have been put in the dock and are sometimes actively marginalized. We can think of this as a lopsided focus on a narrow set of epistemic values and responsibilities—to wit, those having to do with practical knowledge or ‘techne’—at the cost of other, broader epistemic values—such as understanding, wisdom, and intellectual character.

## 2. TEAM MEMBERS

### Project Leaders

[Dr. Rik Peels](#) (1.0 fte)

[Dr. Jeroen de Ridder](#) (0.35 fte)

[Dr. René van Woudenberg](#) (0.55 fte)

### Other Team Members

#### *Research*

Wout Bisschop MA (1.0 fte)

Dr. Gijsbert van den Brink (0.4 fte)

Dr. Lex Bouter (0.4 fte)

Dr. Edwin Koster (0.4 fte)

Dr. Emanuel Rutten (0.2 fte)

Dr. Joeri Tijdink (0,4 fte)

Postdoc (3 years, 0.9 fte)

Postdoc (1 year, 1.0 fte)

PhD-student (1,0 fte)

3 visiting scholars

#### *Project Manager*

Irma Verlaan MSc (0.8 fte)

## 3. DESCRIPTION OF THE SUBPROJECTS

### PART I. EPISTEMIC VALUES AND RESPONSIBILITIES IN THE UNIVERSITY

*The projects in this first part address the foundational issue of which epistemic values ought to be acknowledged in academia and which values academics themselves consider to be crucial to a well-functioning research culture.*

### **Project 1 The Epistemic Values of Academia**

*Dr. Rik Peels*

This first project will carry out the conceptual groundwork that will be employed in each of the other projects. The core question that this first project aims to answer is the following: What are the main epistemic values that the university ought to uphold and how are they reflected in the different methods that the various academic disciplines employ?

## **Project 2 Research Integrity**

*Dr. Lex Bouter, Dr. Joeri Tjeldink, PhD-student*

This project will collect evidence on fostering research integrity at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, but with a view to generate generalizable insights. The main research question is: What do members of our academic community consider to be the most salient aspects of the research culture that promote or hinder research integrity, and which do they believe to be the most important barriers to responsible conduct of research and the most promising interventions to prevent research misconduct and questionable research practices?

### **PART II. UNIVERSITIES, TEACHING, INTELLECTUAL VIRTUES, AND MEANING**

*The projects in the second part address how universities can inculcate individual and collective intellectual virtues. They offer both theoretical reflections on these issues as well as material directly relevant to teaching.*

## **Project 3 Collective Intellectual Virtues**

*Dr. Jeroen de Ridder*

The guiding thought for this project is that the perspective of virtue epistemology—i.e., thinking about the qualities that make an agent intellectually excellent and their mutual relations—can also be fruitfully applied to collectives. The central question: How can groups be intellectually virtuous and how can we stimulate collective intellectual virtues and educate for them?

## **Project 4 The University and the Meaning of Life**

*Dr. Emanuel Rutten*

What the meaning of life is, is a life-shaping question that is hardly ever raised in academic teaching. Yet, being able to cogently reflect on what is significant, worthwhile, and valuable to pursue in life is indispensable for personal growth and development. This project's aim is, therefore, to elucidate how reflection on existential questions, such as 'What is the meaning of life?', can be undertaken. Can it be approached by purely scientific means, or is there a need for a more inclusive model of rational deliberation?

## **Project 5 Cultivating Intellectual Virtues, Critical Thinking, and Personal Development Through University Teaching**

*Dr. Edwin Koster*

Universities not only aim for their students to master an academic discipline. They also want them to develop the art of judgment, with a focus on critical reflection on science, ethical professionalism, and academic citizenship. The main research question of this project is: In what ways can universities, and academic teaching in particular, help students to cultivate intellectual virtues, to develop a capacity for critical thinking, and to reflect on existential questions?

### **PART III. SCIENCE AND THE HUMANITIES: THE TWO LEGS OF THE UNIVERSITY**

*The overall purpose of this third part is to argue that universities have the intellectual responsibility to explicate how the various sciences hang together, and also how the sciences and the humanities relate—given that the humanities have, or at least can have, an epistemic standing that makes them denizens of the academy with the same rights as the sciences.*

## **Project 6 The Responsibility of the University for the Unity of Academic Knowledge**

*Dr. René van Woudenberg*

There is one world, but there are many academic disciplines, which raises the question how they relate. Since universities are places where the primary responsibilities are epistemic, universities have a special

responsibility to develop views on this. The two key questions of this project are: How, from an epistemological perspective, do the many deliverances of the sciences and the humanities relate to each other, and to the one world? And: Are universities responsible for developing and communicating views about how the deliverances of the academic disciplines hang together?

### **Project 7 The Epistemology of Interpretation in the Humanities**

*Dr. René van Woudenberg, Wout Bisschop MA*

This project investigates the epistemic status of one of the core activities of the humanities: interpretation, and aims to show that interpretation, when done responsibly, provides us with knowledge. It does so by answering two questions: What is it for a text to have meaning—what is it that a text has when it has meaning? And: What is ‘an interpretation of a text’, and when are we justified in thinking that a particular interpretation of a text is correct?

### **Project 8 From Queen to Quixotic? The Role and Relevance of Theology in the University**

*Dr. Gijsbert van den Brink*

This project addresses the role and relevance of theology within contemporary universities. The core question that Van den Brink will answer is: What legitimate role for theology is left within public universities, given the secularizing and religiously diverse societies that dominate contemporary Western culture?

## **PART IV. OVERARCHING PROJECTS**

### **Project 9 Four Fellowships**

We will give out four fellowships to academics through an open competition in response to a call for proposals.

### **Project 10 Three Summer Seminars**

The summer seminars are on the topic of ‘Science and the Big Questions’, and will contain two specific elements. First, the theme of the epistemic responsibility of universities will explicitly be taken up, and second, the role and importance of the humanities will be thematized. We welcome academics, Ph.D. students, and upper-level students.

### **Project 11 International Conference and Edited Volume**

We will host an international conference, with a call for papers, on the epistemic responsibility of universities. The conference will serve as the spring-board for an edited volume on the epistemic responsibilities of universities to be published by a top-tier academic press.

### **Project 12 White Paper**

We will publish a white paper on the epistemic responsibilities of the university, which transforms the findings of the proposed research in an agenda of actions to be taken. We will compose a draft of the white paper and discuss it at an invitational conference with a number of national stakeholders. The white paper will be disseminated widely. Finally, we will discuss our findings and recommendations with international experts and European dignitaries and opinion leaders.

#### 4. WHAT TO EXPECT FROM US

- Peer reviewed papers, monographs, edited volumes
- Teaching materials:
  - guidelines for teaching about the meaning of life in the university
  - guidelines for teaching interventions that cultivate intellectual virtues
- International conferences, workshops and summer seminars
- Popular talks, newspaper articles, interviews
- A white paper

#### 5. WE ARE OPEN TO COLLABORATION

Please share your research and teaching ideas with us!

**Contact**

Website [www.abrahamkuypercenter.nl](http://www.abrahamkuypercenter.nl)

Email [abrahamkuypercenter@vu.nl](mailto:abrahamkuypercenter@vu.nl)

The project will be executed from the Abraham Kuyper Center for Science and the Big Questions at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.